

5 Points for Your Empathy Arsenal

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The arguments you need to explain why empathy is a key to life-long learning.



Look no further than the role of empathy in [human-centered design](#), in [conflict resolution](#), in the [boardroom](#)—yes, even in the [preservation of earth](#) ([don't take our word for it](#))—and you'll realize that empathy matters for reasons beyond the fact that learning outcomes improve (though they do: read on). In fact, we're dedicating an entire site to helping make that case, and to equipping parents, teachers, and everyone in between with the tools they need to practice. But we value what we measure, and when it comes to holding ourselves accountable to educational outcomes, that's a good thing. Chances are you don't have hours and hours to pore through every successive study on the ways in which empathy impacts a teacher's ability to teach, a student's ability to learn, and the ability of both to thrive in a rapidly

changing world. So we've put together a cheat sheet to help you make the case, whether you're a teacher urging your principal to prioritize play, or a parent deciding what kind of education you really want for your child.

1. Can empathy really be taught?

We prefer the term “caught,” as Ashoka Fellow [Mary Gordon would say](#). Empathy is not something to be learned in a 45-minute lecture on the subject: it's something [all of us are born with](#), but it, like any other skill, demands practice.

Around the world, hundreds of social entrepreneurs are employing a variety of innovative techniques designed to cultivate empathy skills. Those techniques include everything from [literature](#) and storytelling, to [imaginative play](#) for preschoolers (and indeed, [play period](#)), to exercises designed to [build social fitness](#).

To read more about these techniques, and learn what you can do to cultivate empathy in yourself and others, [click here](#). And of course, if you have your own ideas about strategies that work – for parents, for teachers, or for kids – please share them!

2. How do you measure it?

Famed psychologist and Cambridge professor Simon Baron-Cohen, author of [*The Science of Evil: On Empathy and the Origins of Human Cruelty*](#), has created a series of questions designed to measure a person's “[Empathy Quotient](#),” and researchers are continuing to develop a variety of assessment tools to measure [emotional intelligence](#), social-emotional competence in children (we're particularly fans of the [Devereux Student Strength Assessment](#)), and more. Nobel Prize Laureate and psychologist Daniel Kahneman gives a nod to the [Interpersonal Reactivity Index](#) in his book [*Thinking, Fast and Slow*](#), and we think it's a nod worth heeding. Developed in 1980, the tool measures everything from perspective-taking in daily life, to empathic concern and a person's tendencies to experience distress in response to distress in others. Click [here](#) to download, and try it

yourself.

But we're not advocating for another addition to the battery of tests students currently undergo. Besides, empathic skills exist in a spectrum, meaning you can be strong in certain areas and less so in others. Rather than attempt to evaluate whether someone does or doesn't have empathy, we prefer instead to unpack the term, breaking it down into specific behaviors like perspective-taking ability, collaboration and teamwork skills, cultural competency, helpfulness, effective communication & active listening, among others.

Fortunately, that doesn't mean starting from scratch. The [Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning](#) (CASEL) has broken emotional intelligence skills into five core groups: (i) self awareness; (ii) social awareness; (iii) self management and organization; (iv) responsible decision making; and, (v) relationship management, which have been the basis for many of [today's social emotional learning standards](#). The [New Teacher Center](#), founded by Ashoka Fellow [Ellen Moir](#), is working with the [Cleo Eulau Center](#) to simplify critical skills into six key competencies teachers need to promote social-emotional well-being in the classroom: the result supporting hundreds of thousands of new teachers and teacher mentors across the country, and years spent understanding what goes into a learning environment where teacher, students, and administrators can thrive. Those competencies—which include empathy, establishing healthy boundaries and limit setting, taking a strength-based approach, and active and reflective listening, among others—have served as the basis for observation guides for teachers and principals alike. And a number of organizations are working to define new standards for entire schools, examining the kinds of conditions that must be in place in order to create a thriving learning environment where practicing empathy is the norm. (For more, see [Turnaround for Children's proposed dashboard](#), and the set of the indicators they use to measure a school's ability to serve the social-emotional and learning needs of kids living amidst high-poverty.)

We find that the best assessments are those that give the person being evaluated—young or old—a sense of his or her strengths and areas for continued improvement. And because empathy must be modeled, it's important that such evaluations exist as much for teachers and principals as for students. Whatever rubric you choose to use, remember to measure the things that really matter.

3. How does empathy impact the learning environment?

Dozens of studies have demonstrated the impact of empathy and the various skills it entails on classroom performance, proving that far from being a “nice-to-have,” empathy is essential if we're to make any serious inroads in producing the schools all of us are after.

If reading study after study in leading academic journals sounds like your definition of a quality Sunday afternoon, we encourage you to check out a few of the studies [here](#). But if you're tight on time, here's a quick summary:

More good stuff:

- **Increase in pro-social behavior:** As Ashoka Fellow and founder of [Peace First Eric Dawson](#) is quick to point out, it's time we move beyond anti-bullying and anti-violence, and [equip kids with the skills they need to be peacemakers](#). For example, studies of Peace First and [Roots of Empathy](#) have revealed that both programs [led to increases in positive and inclusive behaviors](#), including helpfulness, sharing, and [willingness to include other students in games and groups](#).
- **Improved school performance:** Numerous studies have shown that practicing empathy leads to improved classroom management and more time for learning, for the simple reason that [students arrive in class more ready to learn](#). By spending less time on discipline, teachers have more time to teach, leading to [increases in overall school performance](#).

- **Safer Schools: Teachers in Playworks schools perceived that students felt safer and more included at recess, compared to teachers in control schools.**
- **School Connectedness: School connectedness refers to the belief by students that adults and peers at school care about both their learning and them as individuals. (See CDC’s [“Fostering School Connectedness”](#) for more.) It is the strongest protective factor for both boys and girls to decrease substance uses, school absenteeism, early sexual initiation, violence, and risk of unintentional injury, and the second most important factor in safeguarding kids from emotional distress and disordered behavior. And empathy’s role in creating that sense of connection is clear: [84% of Peace First students](#) said that they want to come to school more, and studies have shown that cultivating empathy among teachers and staff leads to [higher levels of belonging](#).**

Less bad stuff.

- **Decrease in aggression & disciplinary actions: In one 2005 study, it was found that cultivating empathic behaviors in first-grade children and offering emotional support in the classroom led to [reduced problem behaviors](#), and others have found commensurate [reductions in the number of disciplinary referrals](#) across grade levels. A wide array of classroom-based programs and school-wide interventions report similar findings, as evidenced by everything from principal referrals to fewer 911 calls.**
- **Less bullying: The recent spate of high-profile bullying cases has led to a spate of new laws over the last few years, designed to increase punishments and enhance reporting practices. However, studies in New Jersey—where some of the most strict**

laws have been put in place—[have questioned their efficacy](#), and evidence remains mixed as to whether such laws actually lead to reductions in bullying behaviors. On the other hand, when it comes to effectively cultivating empathic skills in children, the impact on bullying is far more clear. In a recent Stanford University study, it was found that teachers in Playworks schools [reported less bullying and exclusionary behavior](#) during recess than teachers in control schools. Prominent spokespersons ranging from [Lady Gaga](#) to Free the Children founders [Craig and Mark Kielburger](#) to *Bully* Director [Lee Hirsch](#) have suggested that stopping bullying at its root depends on equipping kids with the empathy and agency they need to think and act as changemakers.

- **Lower absenteeism among students:** Each day, 160,000 students across the country [miss school for fear of being bullied](#). Absenteeism is further compounded by a lack of belonging, and a feeling among students that no one knows or cares that they miss school. So it's no wonder that equipping teachers with empathy in order to teach the whole child is proven to [reduce absenteeism](#): a fact that's been confirmed in [study after study](#).

And what's more, studies have shown that those habits and skills endure from one grade level to the next, and beyond the classroom doors.

4. You keep saying empathy's a critical skill. Why exactly?

For starters, empathy has been touted as a critical skill in professions ranging from [medicine](#), to [business management and leadership](#), to [customer service](#), to [design](#) and [engineering](#), to [technology](#) and – well, you get the picture.

But don't just take our word for it – read what [others have to say](#) about why empathy matters at home, in school, and in their respective fields.

5. What else you got?

Much has been made of the [importance of resilience](#) as a predictor of long-term success. In a [seminal study](#) that followed a group of low-income individuals in Kauai from childhood to adulthood, it was found that the kids who made it—who built up strong levels of resilience, and learned to overcome whatever obstacles came their way—had one thing in common. Each had a supportive adult—someone outside his or her immediate family—who not only set high expectations, but enabled him or her to meet them, and forged a lasting relationship grounded in empathy.